

26 November 2007

Mr Nick Jarman
Director of Childrens & Young People's Services
Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council
Progress House
Westwood Park Drive
Wigan
WN3 4HH

Dear Mr Jarman

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN WIGAN METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

This letter summarises the findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment for your local authority. The judgements in the letter draw on your review of the Children and Young People's Plan, your action plan arising from the joint area review (JAR) and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. The letter comments on progress since the recent JAR. We are grateful for the information you provided to support this process and for the time given by you and your colleagues during the assessment.

Overall effectiveness of children's services

Grade 3

Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council delivers above minimum requirements in many aspects of its services. The council has responded positively to the recommendations raised in the JAR report and has made good progress since that time. The contribution the council makes towards improving outcomes in being healthy, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic well-being remains good and there have been some significant improvements in outcomes. The contribution to staying safe is adequate. Progress has been slow in resolving the issues around the undertaking of assessments. As a result, performance did not improve fast enough. The council has been successful in supporting schools and standards continue to rise, particularly at secondary level. The majority of schools have been judged as good or better in Ofsted school inspections; one primary school is in an Ofsted category of concern. Overall, the council has taken significant steps to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of its services with positive outcomes.

Being healthy

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. One recommendation emerged from the JAR.

For action in the next six months

- Ensure that agencies work together to accelerate progress in reducing teenage pregnancy and the number of expectant mothers who smoke.

The council and its partners have taken robust, integrated and well-prioritised action to reduce teenage pregnancy. The views of 1,700 young people are effectively influencing planning. Substantial additional funding has been allocated and a new integrated sexual health service has been commissioned. Access to services has improved, including online advice. There is effective targeting of six 'hot spot' areas through, for example, the TIC TAC bus which has received 4,500 callers. Preventative support within schools has been strengthened. Sex and relationship education has improved and a multi-agency one-stop shop has been placed in a school which had the highest number of conceptions in 2005. The council has a good understanding of the reasons for the increase in conceptions in 2005. It is effectively tackling this and is confident that the impact of recent actions is resulting in improvement. Local data show that conceptions have reduced from 345 in 2005 to 282 in 2006, with the majority of targeted areas showing particular improvements.

Additional resources have been allocated to reduce further the proportion of expectant mothers who smoke. The reduction of 0.9% in 2005–06 was better than the benchmark average. The smoking in pregnancy team is now fully operational and focuses on the whole family; in 2006–07 the team saw 181 women of whom 43% were not smoking four weeks later. Post natal support has been strengthened and data collation has also improved.

Most health outcomes have shown a steady improvement since the JAR. Good progress is being sustained in reducing numbers of low birth weight babies and deaths in infancy and childhood; figures are lower than the England average. Emergency admissions to hospital have reduced. Breast-feeding rates are improving but remain below the benchmark average. Oral health, although improved, remains significantly higher than the England average, but appropriate early intervention is in place. Good numbers of looked after children and young people benefit from annual health assessments. Resources have been increased and this has resulted in higher numbers of care leavers engaging with the service.

Strong partnership working, a culture of improvement, and a significant investment in early intervention support a holistic approach to health promotion. This includes targeted action with Black and minority ethnic children and young people. Schools are well integrated in this work; all are actively engaged with the Healthy Schools

Standard and the December 2006 target was met. There is good action to improve health through participation in school sports.

Almost all young people are able to access a substance misuse treatment service specifically for them, and this is higher than regionally. The completed review of services is influencing commissioning. Early interventions have reduced the numbers referred to specialist services; in 2006–07 there were 76 fewer referrals. The unexpectedly high number of hospital admissions, largely due to alcohol related admissions for 18–20 year olds, is being soundly tackled.

There has been good progress towards a comprehensive Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). Staffing has increased and the needs of looked after children, those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and young offenders are effectively prioritised. Waiting times for specialist cases have improved significantly. Sound action is being taken to ensure that services for newly referred 16–17 year olds are provided by the CAMHS team. Well-prioritised multi-agency action is improving Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning provision in schools and tackling cyber bullying and self harm.

Area(s) for development

- Further reduce teenage conceptions.
- Reduce health inequalities especially in relation to breast-feeding and oral health.

Staying safe

Grade 2

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. Although preventative work and child protection performance are positive, there are weaknesses in relation to assessment performance with low numbers of completed core assessments. Timescales for initial and core assessments are poor. No recommendations emerged from the JAR which judged this area as good.

Recent school inspections judge that the extent to which learners adopt safe practices is good or better in the overwhelming majority of schools. Good action to tackle road safety has reduced the number of children killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents from 30 in 2005 to 14 in 2006. Racial monitoring in schools is improving and the needs of asylum seekers and children from Black and minority ethnic groups are appropriately prioritised. There is sound multi-agency action to tackle the impact of domestic abuse, including multi-agency risk assessment for serious offenders. A good range of preventative services is in place, including those delivered by the voluntary sector and good progress has been made since the joint area review to further develop all-age preventative and parenting strategies. Staff from 39 agencies have been trained in the use of the Common Assessment

Framework and 26 assessments have been completed. The council has soundly prioritised action to increase this number and further embed the framework.

Timescales for initial and core assessments were identified as an area for improvement in the 2005 annual performance assessment and the JAR noted “positive action to improve the capacity of duty systems”. However, in 2006–07 the number of core assessments completed was 39.2 per 10,000 which is considerably lower than the national average of 84.5. Timeliness of core assessments, although improved from 39% to 44%, remains inadequate and is notably lower than the national picture. The percentage of initial assessments completed within timescales increased slightly to 51.8%, which is also worse than the England average of 68.4%. The council reports an improving picture in the first quarter of 2007–08 after further action to tighten procedures. Improved data management has led to a significant reduction in numbers of referrals with figures now much closer to the England average. There is better than national performance in relation to the proportion leading to initial referrals. However the proportion of repeat referrals remains higher than nationally.

Support to children on the Child Protection Register is effective. Numbers of children with a protection plan are low. The percentage of initial enquiries leading to conference within 15 days is in line with the national picture. All children on the register are allocated to a qualified social worker and their cases are reviewed in a timely way. Support is available at an early stage to prevent registration. Thresholds are well understood by local agencies, numbers of re-registrations remain low and de-registrations are in line with similar authorities and the national average. The Local Safeguarding Children’s Board is appropriately structured and attendance is satisfactory. The effectiveness of partners’ safeguarding arrangements has been well audited and found robust. A data set for reporting performance has been recently agreed. Decision making in relation to serious case reviews is in line with statutory requirements and sound progress is being made to implement requirements for the Child Death Overview Panel.

Outcomes for looked after children and young people are broadly in line with the national picture. There is better than national performance in relation to timeliness of reviews. Sound gate keeping has resulted in a steady reduction in the number of looked after children. Increased support has improved placement stability for children in long-term foster care; it is now comparable with the England average, as is in-year placement stability. The proportion of children in foster care, including the high proportion fostered by family and friends, reflects the national picture as do numbers and timeliness of adoption. Almost all looked after children and young people, and all care leavers have an appropriately qualified worker but numbers of older care leavers with pathway plans are lower than in similar authorities.

Area(s) for development

- Significantly improve the timeliness of initial assessments and the proportion and timeliness of core assessments.

- Increase the proportion of older care leavers with pathway plans.

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. The positive work identified at the time of the JAR has been maintained and extended. Two recommendations emerged from the JAR.

For action in the next six months

- Ensure that information on services for parents and young people is readily available in a range of appropriate languages and formats.
- Take steps to ensure that children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities can participate fully in recreational and voluntary learning activities and that this approach is embedded in all council policies.

The council has made good progress in tackling these actions, especially in adopting a common policy. Information is now available in several formats, including Braille. Staff can refer to key phrases in 21 languages and some public material has been translated, such as that in Czech on school attendance. An audit of those young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who access recreational provision has highlighted areas for consideration and key staff have received training on how to support these young people. Information is being shared with Connexions and good links have been developed with voluntary groups to provide personal care.

The council's setting of challenging targets and support for schools and vulnerable groups are reflected in improving outcomes especially at secondary level where no school is below floor target or in an Ofsted category of concern. Standards are rising at Key Stages 3 and 4. The gap narrowed considerably between Wigan and the national average in the proportion of young people who gain five or more GCSEs A* to C. The proportion of looked after young people who achieved this was above the national average as was the proportion who sat at least one GCSE.

Early years provision is good. On entry to the reception year, children are doing better than in similar authorities and nationally in personal, social and emotional development and in communication, language and literacy. Good achievement at Key Stages 1 and 2 is now also evident at Key Stages 3 and 4. The average value added between Key Stages 2 and 4 rose to above the national average, although there is a wide disparity between schools. Mathematics is strong across the primary and secondary sectors. However, standards in English at Key Stages 1 and 2, although above the national average, dipped particularly in writing. In all key stages, targets for higher attainment were missed.

Attendance has risen in secondary schools and, as in primaries, is above the national average. Immediate intervention on the first day of absence has improved the attendance of looked after young people. While there was a dramatic reduction to 0.08 in the percentage of permanent exclusions in secondary schools, the percentage of fixed-term exclusions is higher than in similar authorities and nationally, especially in relation to children and young people with a statement of special educational need. Recent data indicate this has decreased significantly as a result of revised protocols and initiatives including restorative justice.

A good range of provision is in place to support asylum seekers and children from migrant families. The English as an additional language team has productive links and partnerships with other agencies and services to share resources and expertise, particularly to support children and young people from Eastern Europe.

Area(s) for development

- Reverse the dip in standards at Key Stages 1 and 2 in English, especially in writing.
- Strengthen the achievement of higher attaining children and young people in all key stages.

Making a positive contribution

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. No recommendation emerged from the JAR which judged this area to be good.

The strong commitment to involving children and young people in decision-making is progressing well. The Children and Young People's Plan for 2006–07 strongly reflected their views and priorities, including those from vulnerable groups. Participation in strategic decision-making has strengthened through the representative and well-supported Young People's Participation Panel. The revised participation strategy is now implemented. An audit of current practice against national standards supports the implementation of the Children and Young People's Services Pledge. The Friends Together Project in Leigh is an example of the good action taken to improve community cohesion and to strengthen cultural understanding between newly arrived and more established primary school children and their parents.

Good, timely progress has been made in implementing the recommendations of the Enhanced Youth Inspection. The curriculum has been improved, young people are more effectively involved in reviewing their progress, and accredited outcomes are being more efficiently recorded. External funding has been secured to expand

provision and sound action is in place to improve the quality of buildings. Targeted work has started with children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and despite a modest budget, numbers of young people in contact with the service increased by 5.3% in 2006–07.

The council and its partners continue to be effective in tackling anti-social behaviour. Since the JAR, the Partners in Prevention pilot has delivered additional curriculum to all Year 8 pupils in three schools and provides well-targeted multi-agency support for those most at risk. Some 129 children were supported through the Youth Inclusion Support Panel in 2006–07.

The council's actions to prevent offending and re-offending are having a positive impact at all levels. The Youth Offending Team is strongly engaged in early intervention and works well with other agencies. Consequently there were 12.6% fewer first-time entrants into the system in 2006. Sound action is in place to reduce offending by looked after children and young people; performance continues to be adequate. Re-offending rates are reducing well and are better than the England average. Good analysis of performance results in effective action to respond quickly to any deterioration.

The contribution of looked after young people to reviews of their care has improved well from 79% to 88% and performance is adequate in this respect. A proactive approach is being taken and reviewing officers ensure that children are contacted before and after reviews. Elected members receive regular reports on performance but their opportunities to meet with looked after children are limited.

Area(s) for development

- Increase opportunities for looked after children and young people to participate in corporate parenting.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. Two recommendations emerged from the JAR.

For action in the next six months

- Ensure implementation of the new 14–19 strategy to extend collaboration between institutions and provide a full range of appropriate and accessible learning opportunities across the borough for all young people.
- Provide sufficient access for young offenders to pre-entry level training and flexible further education provision.

Since the JAR the council has made continued good progress in widening the range of opportunities for young people 14–19, particularly those looked after and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities including mental health issues. Innovative joint work with MENCAP is providing support for a small group of very vulnerable young people in work-based learning. Nevertheless, at 31%, the proportion of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities not in education, employment or training is almost twice the national average. External funding is used effectively to re-engage young offenders and to provide an expanded range of pre-entry level training. However, the council fell far short of its target of 90% with only 67% of supervised juveniles in full-time education, employment and training. More recent data indicate a higher proportion. The online prospectus gives clear information about providers and courses available. Child care provision has increased, especially in full day care places, and the children's centres are working with private providers to offer care from birth to school age.

Effective partnership between the education service, Youth Service, Youth Offending Team, Connexions and the Learning and Skills Council is reflected in improved participation, retention and success rates in education, employment and training. The proportion of young people not in education, employment and training at the age of 19 has fallen, although at 8.9% it is higher than in similar authorities and England as a whole. The increase in the proportion engaged in full-time learning matches the national figure; proportions in work-based and part-time learning remain above the national average as does the proportion of teenage mothers in education, employment or training. The ratio of looked after young people at 16 who are in education, training or employment at 18 has improved slightly and remains very good compared with similar authorities and the national average. Retention rates on courses at Levels 1, 2 and 3 are close to national figures. Wigan leads Greater Manchester in converting jobs without training into apprenticeships and in having the highest proportion completing apprenticeships successfully. The success rate on the AA NVQ is 7.6% above the national average. Attainment at Levels 2 and 3 rose for the third year running. Level 2 attainment now matches the national average. At 38.5%, performance at Level 3 is still below, and also just below the average of similar authorities.

The management and implementation of the 14–19 strategy have been significantly reviewed and reshaped following the unsuccessful initial Gateway bid. The appointment of a Personalised Learning Consultant and the alignment of the advisory and consultancy service with the three area collaboratives has strengthened leadership. Rapid progress has been made to foster ownership of the diplomas with partners and initiate workforce training. The participation of local employers in strategic planning has strengthened. All nine diploma writing groups have representatives from all partners. Current effective practice, especially the specialist strands of schools and colleges, forms the basis for new area-based diploma submissions.

Area(s) for development

- Attainment at Level 3.
- The reduction of the proportion of young people, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and supervised juveniles, not in education, employment or training.

The council's capacity to improve, including its management of services for children and young people

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The council has good capacity to improve its services for children and young people. Its management of these services is good. One recommendation emerged from the JAR.

For action in the longer term

- Ensure that partners develop an integrated medium-term financial strategy to support the implementation of their priorities.

Following consultation with partners, the council reduced the number of partnership priorities significantly and plans now have quarterly milestones linked to relevant key performance indicators. Action is regularly reviewed and evaluated but minutes and reports do not all record clear evidence in relation to specific targets. A joint commissioning framework has been agreed, a medium-term financial strategy for the council is in place for 2008–11 and work is well advanced to identify current levels of funding across the partnership. Improved collaboration is fostering an increasingly positive culture in implementing the Children and Young People's Plan. Services are using data well to identify trends and 'hot spots' and to align resources. Rigorous arrangements to review risk and evaluate performance have led to several services being decommissioned and re-commissioned, including some led by the Primary Care Trust. There is now an integrated risk register. Services are successful in gaining external funding to support initiatives and young people have a real voice in service design and review. The implementation of protocols across services is increasing consistency of expectations and approach. A common drive to make the most of expertise and resources is reflected in the setting up of specialist teams. Funding is well targeted to priorities with due focus on training the workforce.

The review of the Children and Young People's Plan highlighted improvement in 34 of the 50 key indicators compared with the previous year, but did not indicate where some still fell below national figures or those of similar authorities. While overall progress has been good, challenges remain, especially in making recent improvements in social care secure and raising attainment at Level 3.

Several senior managers, including the Director and Deputy Director of Children's Services, have left since the JAR. A Deputy Director was soon appointed and the new Director takes up post in January. The interim appointment of a highly experienced Acting Director, with a specific brief to manage the Children's Trust Arrangement, has sustained clarity of direction and added impetus to action.

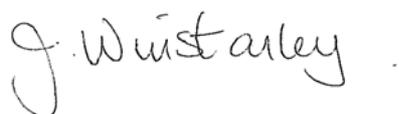
Area(s) for development

- The clear indication in minutes and reports of outcomes in relation to specific targets and planned actions.

Overall the council has demonstrated good progress in meeting the JAR recommendations and has shown good capacity to maintain and improve further its services for children and young people.

The children's services grade is the performance rating for the purpose of section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It will also provide the score for the children and young people service block in the comprehensive performance assessment to be published by the Audit Commission.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Juliet Winstanley".

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection